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Chicago Airmail History: McGirr and Waterman Airports

by Helen Knight

(Geography 1108)

Abstract

Aviation history in the Chicago area is marked by famous names, documented achievements, and historic events. Lincoln Beachey set an altitude record in 1911 at Grant Park. Glenn Curtiss raced in Chicago before he became known as an aviation pioneer in the United States aircraft industry. In 1924, three planes and six pilots were the first to fly around the world including a stop in Chicago. Even famed aviatrix Amelia Earhart was connected to Chicago. Other Chicago area aviation stories are not as widely known, but they record important contributions to aviation progress just the same. This paper presents one such story about two small towns west of Chicago and their airports involved with the airmail route between Chicago, Illinois and Omaha, Nebraska. Along the transcontinental airmail route were the small town airports of McGirr and Waterman, Illinois. This is the story of their roles and contributions to the success of airmail flights to and from Chicago.

Chicago Aviation History

Chicago area aviation history contains many famous names, achievements, and events. In 1911, Lincoln Beachey set a world altitude record of 11,642 feet at the 1911 Chicago International Aviation Meet at Grant Park (Young, 2003). In 1924, “A group of around-the-world flyers landed their Douglas cruisers at an air mail strip in Grant park to much fanfare on September 16, 1924. One of the three planes in the group was the ship ‘Chicago’, and the six pilots and three planes became the first to fly around the world” (Chicago Tribune, 1924). Famed aviatrix Amelia Earhart was connected to Chicago as documented on an archived photo with the caption “After her historic flight as the first woman to pilot across the Atlantic Ocean, Hyde Park’s own Amelia Earhart spoke at her old high school in 1928 (Chicago Tribune, 1928). In March 1929, an amphibious plane called the Untin Bowler attempted a flight, “. . . from Chicago to Berlin and back with a crew of three” (Chicago Tribune, 1929). In 1947, “A brass band and several state and city dignitaries greeted a Pan American World Airways flight that was the first around-the-world flight to land in Chicago on June 30, 1947” (Chicago Tribune, 1947).

Other select aviation events provide a context for this history. Perhaps the most famous event occurred on December 17, 1903, the day Orville and Wilbur Wright made the first successful powered airplane flight at Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina (U. S. Centennial of Flight, 2013b). Fifteen years later, aviation had progressed enough for the United States Post Office to establish airmail service (Eney, 2014). Thus starts the story of the transcontinental airmail route section between Chicago, Illinois and Omaha, Nebraska and the connection to the Illinois cities of McGirr and Waterman. The paper discusses the early Illinois airmail routes, flying airmail at night, two airmail airports west of Chicago, and the end of the airmail era.

Illinois Airmail Routes

The early history of the United States airmail service was one of struggles to transport mail by open cockpit airplanes from coast to coast starting in 1918. The early aircraft that carried sacks of mail had no instrumentation, not even a reliable compass, no radios, and no electrical system. The hardy pilots flew in open cockpit airplanes, in all kinds of weather without benefit of weather reporting or forecasting. The pilots flew in layered clothing of coats, hats, gloves, and facemasks, but

hypothermia and resulting disorientation was always a threat. Navigation was accomplished using road maps to cross this railroad track at about a thirty-degree angle, pass one mile north of this town and directly over the next, then fly over a factory chimney. The pilots depended on daylight and good visibility to stay on course.

Chicago's airmail history began at Grant Park. Chicago was a stopover and mail pickup point for aircraft traveling east and west along the transcontinental route. The conditions at Grant Park at the shore of Lake Michigan were often too bad for flying with fog, low clouds, wind, and snow, so the airmail operations were moved farther inland to a small airport called Checkerboard Field in Maywood, Illinois at the intersection of Roosevelt Road and 1st Avenue (Checkerboard Flying Field, 2006). A short time later, the airmail operations were moved a short distance across the street to what was Edward Hines Jr. Veterans Administration Hospital (Checkerboard Flying Field). Appendix A provides pictures for comparison of then and now. Appendix B shows a 1926 hand drawn diagram of airmail route beacon and field locations.

One of the most famous pilots on the 1920's airmail routes was Charles Lindbergh. According to the Ruzich (2014), Lindbergh helped make Maywood, Illinois a key site in aviation's early days. In 1926 Lindbergh made his first airmail flight on the route from Maywood Field to St Louis. A marker dedicated to those early pioneers is near the site of Checkerboard Airport. See Appendix A for a picture of its location in Millers Meadows.

Lindbergh crashed several times while flying the mail across Illinois. A marker about 75 air miles southwest of Maywood near Ottawa, Illinois documents how Lindbergh bailed out of his aircraft after it ran out of fuel on September 16, 1926. See Appendix C for a picture of the marker. On November 3, 1926, after running low on fuel on a night with fog and low clouds, Lindbergh parachuted from his plane and landed southwest of Bloomington, Illinois near the town of Covell (Spirit of St. Louis 2 Project, 2014). One year later he made his historic solo nonstop transatlantic flight.

Flying Airmail at Night

To fly the mail coast to coast faster than the mail could travel by railroad, the aircraft had to fly at night. As described earlier, navigation was done by pilotage from one point on the ground to another point on the ground. At night the features on the ground were almost invisible. There was little hope that a safe landing could be made at night. Unreliable airplanes without instrumentation, lights, or navigation aids and flown by pilots with little night experience, made flying the mail at night extremely dangerous.

In 1923, to guide the pilots across the plains and through the mountains, the Post Office Department began installing tower-mounted rotating gaslight beacons every 25 miles along its routes (Eney, 2014). The pilots flew from beacon to beacon to stay on course and to identify their position along the course. Alongside certain beacons were emergency landing fields for forced landings. According to the Eney, full transcontinental airmail service along the lighted airway became a reality in 1924. See Appendix D for a typical beacon facility.

Airmail Airports: McGirr and Waterman

About 45 miles west of Maywood, and half the way to the next airport in Moline, Illinois was the small town of McGirr. In 1924, "Paul V. Eakle, began operating an emergency airfield in northern Illinois for the U. S. Postal Service as part of the first transcontinental airmail route" (Marks, 2014). Contact was made with Paul Eakle's daughter, Alice Eakle Marks, through her daughter Heather Marks and Heather's husband, Cliff Sanderlin. From an unpublished manuscript and communications with the family, came original information about those airports and the airmail pilots who used them. Following are selected highlights related to Chicago and transcontinental airmail history.

The Eakle family was responsible for having the airport ready for the night mail flights. This included turning on the battery powered lights that marked the perimeter of the grass surface emergency field. The family members also lit the windsock to show the landing pilot the direction of the wind. There were also route indicator lights, and perhaps the most readily recognized symbol of the airmail airports, a lighted rotating beacon (Marks & Sanderlin, 2010).

Marks and Sanderlin (2010) provided details of the rotating beacon that were not found in other sources. The rotating beacon mounted atop the tower, as shown in the drawing, identified the field as part of the official U. S. Government route. The beam was aimed at an angle of one degree up so that it reached out to aircraft as far as 40 miles away when the visibility was good. Just as is done today, pilots read the signal transmitted by the beacon. The beacon lighting system is described as follows:

The rotation of the beacon was synchronized with a stationary green routing light, which blinked three times before each sweep of the rotating beacon. These three blinks of green light meant the facility below was an airfield that was available to airmail planes. The routing lights flashed red if there was no emergency airstrip or regular airfield at that location. Course lights were also located on the tower showing the course to the next beacon, and pointing back to the previous. A transmitted sequence code was repeated every 10 towers, enabling the pilot to tell where he was in the 100 mile segment he was flying. The code letters on the beacon started in the west and south and went east and north. (Marks & Sanderlin, 2010, p. 4.2)

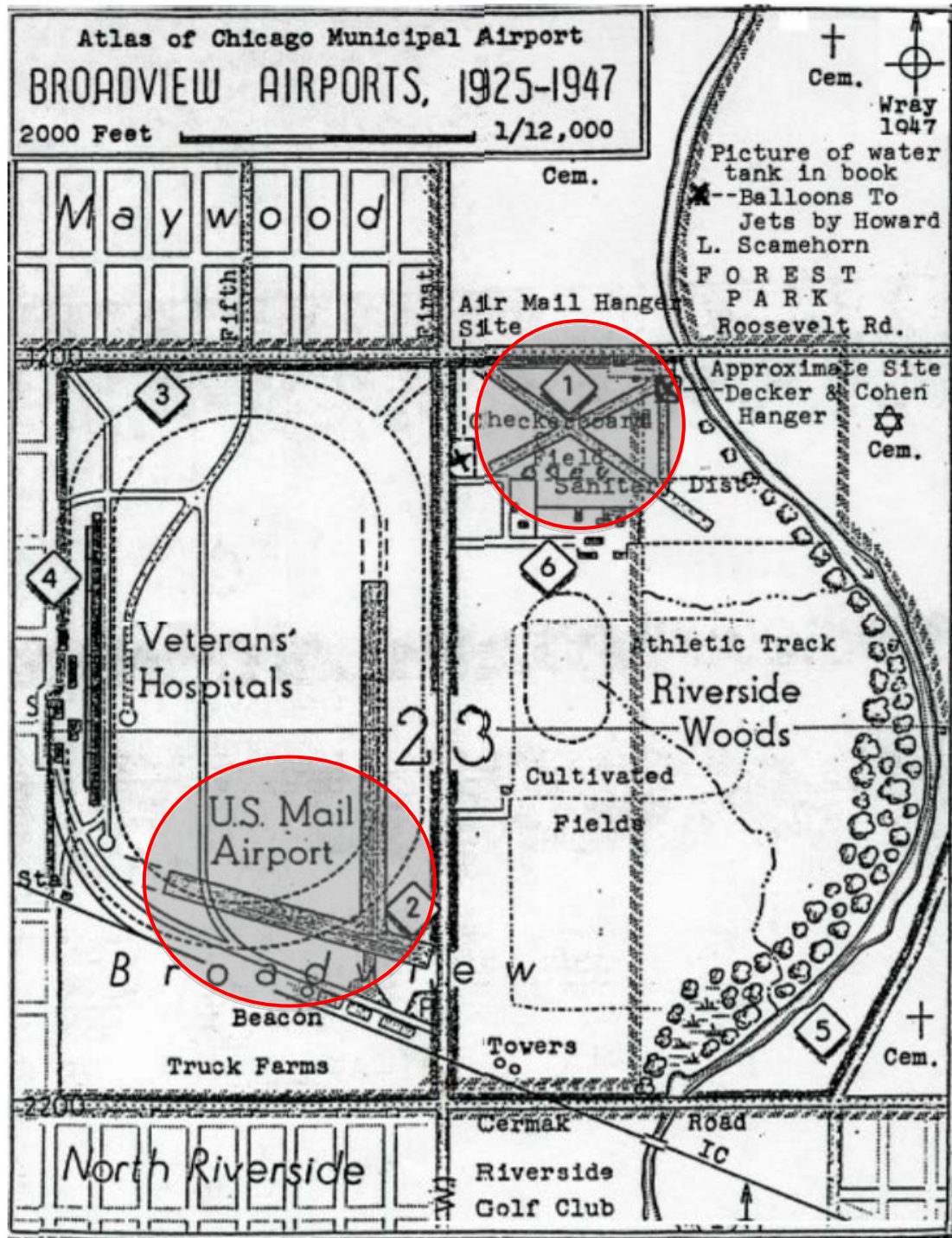
In 1929, Paul Eakle opened a new airport in Waterman, Illinois to escape McGirr's isolation, to have more reliable electric service, and to escape the mud that plagued the roads and the airport's surface (Marks & Sanderlin, 2010). The new site included a U. S. Weather Bureau reporting station that made hourly reports on winds, ceiling, and visibility as well as being an emergency landing site. This new site was about 12 miles southwest of the county seat of DeKalb, Illinois. Paul Eakle managed to have the new Waterman airport named the DeKalb County Airport even though it was not at the county seat (Marks & Sanderlin). Today the DeKalb county airport is just east of the city of DeKalb with its official name of DeKalb Taylor Municipal Airport. See Appendix F for a photo of the Waterman beacon and airport facility.

End of an Era

When contracts with commercial airlines replaced the airmail planes and pilots, the emergency landing field was no longer needed. The airport was eventually removed to make room for a housing development. See Appendix G, which contains a portion of a modern aeronautical chart showing approximate locations of McGirr, Waterman, and Maywood in relation to the major Chicago area airports.

The pilots were adventurers in a dangerous yet grand achievement. They carried sacks of mail in unreliable aircraft, through all kinds of weather, across the plains and through the mountains. Coast to coast airmail service would never have been realized without the people who manned the airports throughout the day and night. First McGirr and then Waterman airports run by the Eakle family, were just two airports along that 2,900 mile route from New York to San Francisco that made it possible to move mail by air.

Appendix A



Source: Checkerboard Air Mail (1997).

Appendix A – Continued

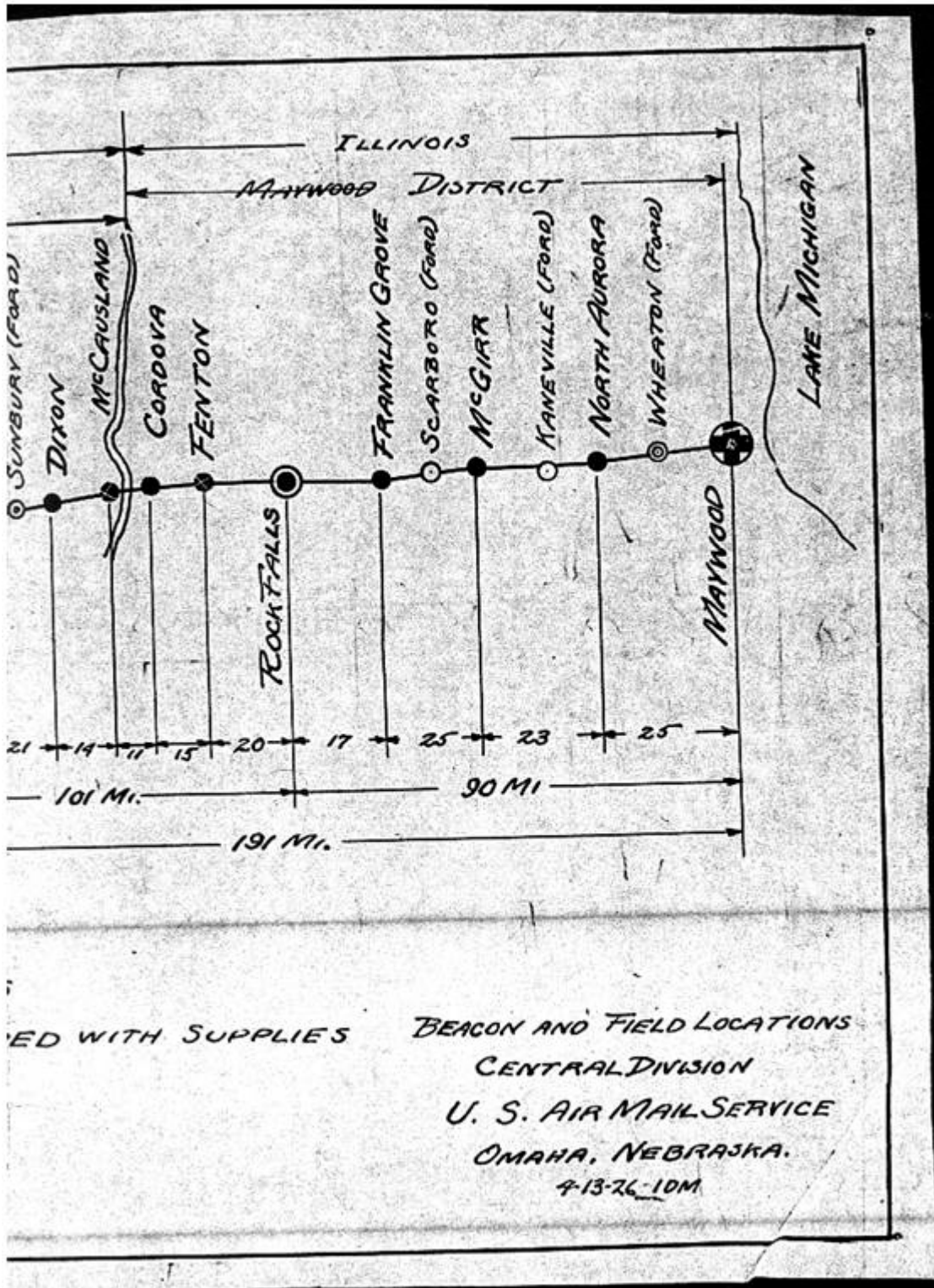


Air Mail Pioneers and Checkerboard Flying Field marker in Maywood, Illinois. Photo by Helen D. “Pat” Knight.



Source and copyrighted by Google Earth, Inc. (2014).

Appendix B



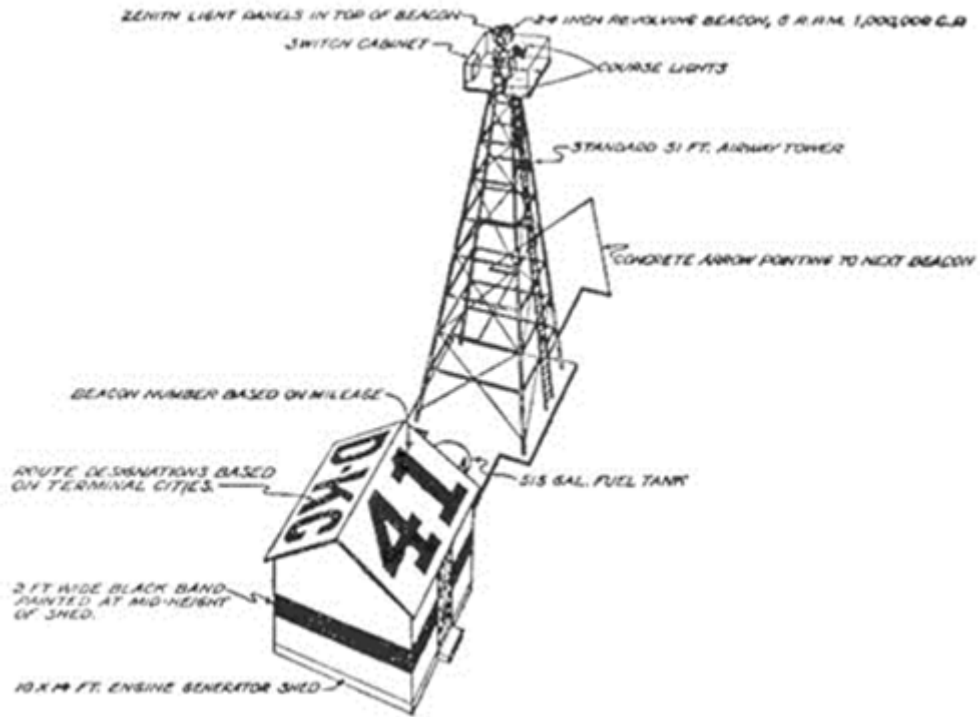
Hand drawn map dated April 13, 1926 of the Maywood section of the airmail route from Chicago to Omaha, Nebraska (H. Marks, personal communication, December 6, 2014)

Appendix C



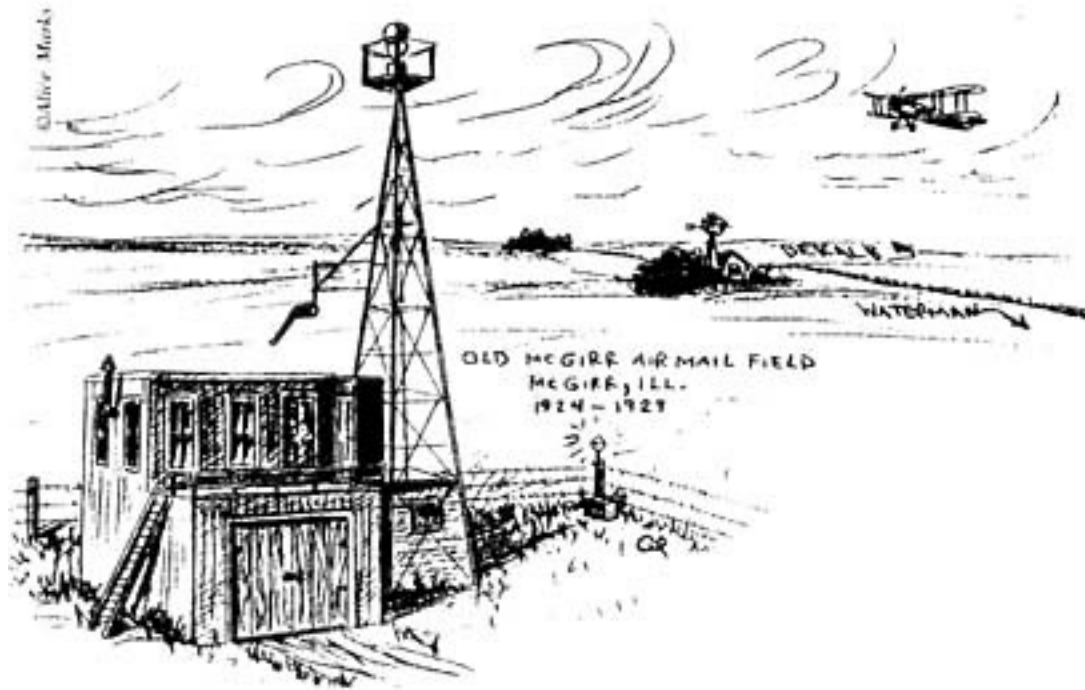
Marker near Ottawa, Illinois where Charles Lindbergh parachuted from his airmail airplane. Picture by Helen D. "Pat" Knight, September 2014.

Appendix D



Standard Airway Beacon Installation, 1931.
Centennial of Flight Commission (2013a)

Appendix E



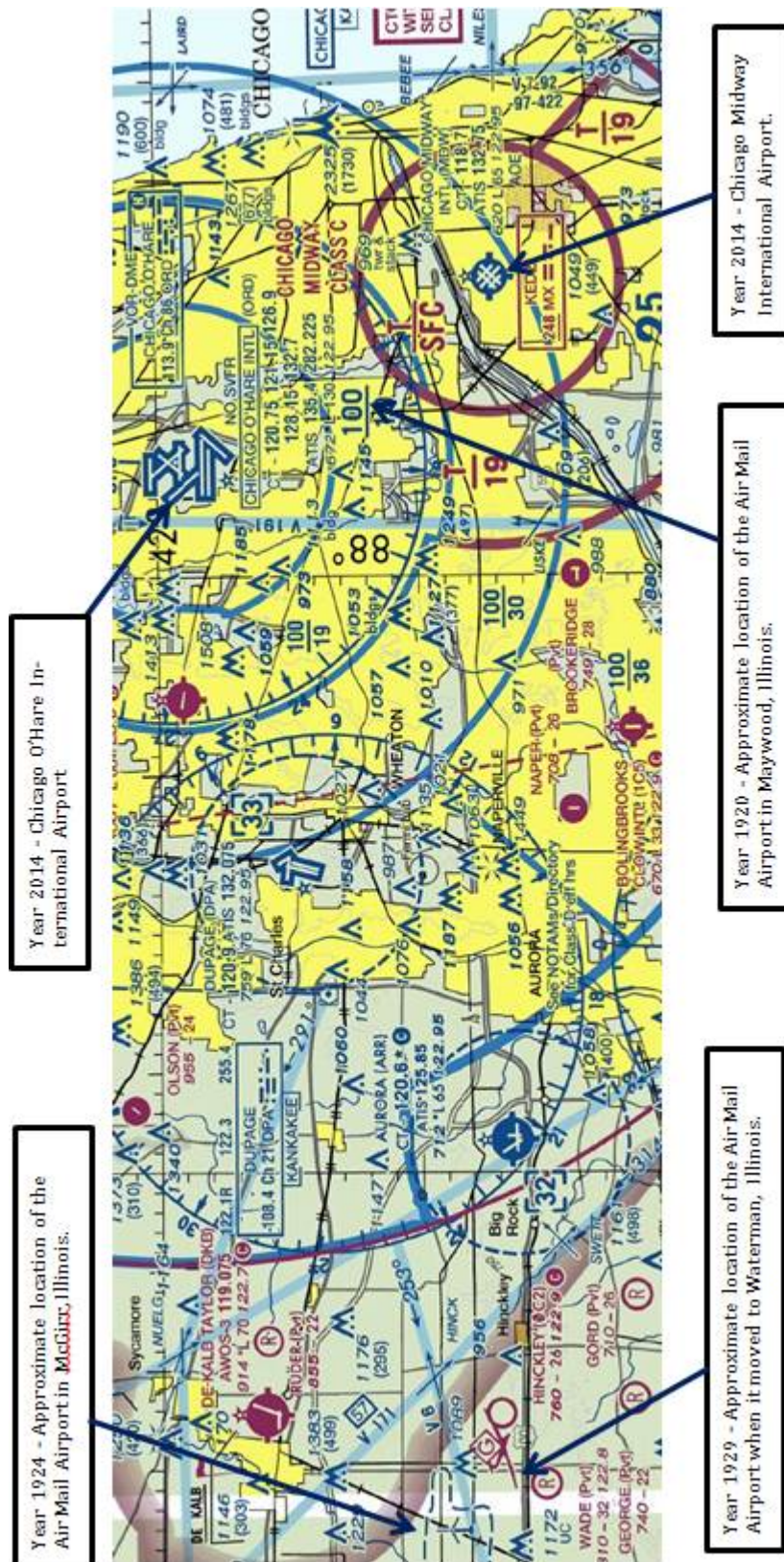
Drawing by Alice Eakle Marks © (H. Marks, personal communication, December 6, 2014).

Appendix F



Waterman airmail airport at the corner of Illinois Route 23 and U.S. Highway 30 with its beacon, hangar, and weather station. (H. Marks, personal communication, December 6, 2014).

Appendix G



Chicago Sectional Aeronautical Chart Federal Aviation Administration (2014).

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